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ABSTRACT

The "Bhagavad Gita" is a didactic dialogue inserted approximately in the middle of an immensely long Indian epic entitled the "Mahabharata." This paper examines the use of narrative in this ancient Hindu religious work, the "Bhagavad Gita"--specific attention is given to how the story in this didactic text uses dialogic events between the two main characters to establish a complicated and seemingly contradictory stance on ethical behavior, unethical behavior, war, etc. Noting that the complicated lineage of events in this work establishes a foundation from which criticism can proceed, the paper shows that the evaluative qualities of narrative "probability" and "fidelity" (as discussed by Fisher, 1987) are not clearly discernible in the text; the western audience can construct differing arguments from this text, as well as receive differing impressions of its coherence and logic. The paper states that, as a result of this analysis, the "Bhagavad Gita" can be considered to advance the narrative paradigm in that it provides a prime example of a "multivalent narrative" from the eastern world. It finds that this text is very deserving of study and that this inquiry has been a step toward constructing some theoretical insights into the practice of Indian rhetoric and narrative practice. Cites 42 works. (NKA)

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Multivalent Narratives and Indian Rhetoric: Insights from the *Bhagavad Gita*

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Introduction

Radhakrishnan and Moore (1957), in their historic study of Indian thought, wrote, "The study of Indian philosophy is important historically, philosophically, and even politically. The Indian philosophical tradition is man's oldest as well as the longest continuous development of speculation about the nature of reality and man's place therein" (p. xxx). One of the seminal works of this Indian philosophical and religious tradition is the *Bhagavad Gita*, a dialogue within the larger epic, the *Mahabharata*. This shorter work chronicles the conversation between Krishna and Arjuna on the eve of an impending battle. Western sources have often turned to this work for inspiration (Minor, 1982). The *Bhagavad Gita* ("Song of the Lord") is an example of a putatively timeless narrative concerning war, duty, the ontology of the self, and the metaphysical status of the world (Crim, 1981; Klostermaier, 1998). Written between 500 BC and 200 BC, it is one of the oldest existing narratives on war and human existence (Audi, 1996; Parrinder, 1995). While it echoes many similar religious and philosophical sentiments that have influenced the western world, it predates them by hundreds of years.

Radhakrishnan (1998) indicates that the *Bhagavad Gita* is one of the most widely read and followed religious texts in the modern world. It is the most frequently read of any document in the Sanskrit language; in terms of religious practice, the *Bhagavad Gita* is the basic moral text of the Hindu devotional movement (Babbili, 1997). The scope of this work's importance is indicated in that "millions of Hindus turn to it for daily inspiration and guidance; many can recite the entire text" (Babbili, 197, p. 140) and that Gandhi read it on a daily basis (Gupta, 1982). Minor (1986) indicates that this is an influential work of religious and motivational thought; it is the most translated text in the world after the Bible. Feuerstein (1983) indicates that the *Bhagavad Gita* is available in more than thirty languages and in more than a thousand individual editions. With this widespread availability to the western world (Sharpe, 1985), critical attention is warranted concerning the cross-cultural acceptance of this narrative and the potential advances in narrative theory it can bring to the west. This attention to Indian rhetoric in general and the *Bhagavad Gita* in specific, however, has been lacking; the sparse rhetorical scholarship that has addresses Indian rhetoric has largely ignored sustained treatment of the *Bhagavad Gita* and its relation to the narrative paradigm (Gangal & Hosterman, 1982; Kirkwood, 1987; 1989; 1990; Oliver, 1971).

This inquiry will examine the use of narrative in the ancient Hindu religious work, the *Bhagavad Gita*. Specific attention will be given to how the story in this didactic text uses dialogic events between the two main characters to establish a complicated and seemingly contradictory stance on ethical behavior, unethical behavior, war, etc. This complicated lineage of events in this work establishes a foundation from which criticism can proceed. The evaluative qualities of narrative *probability* and *fidelity*, as discussed by Fisher (1987), will be shown to be not clearly discernable in this text; the western audience can construct vastly differing arguments from this text, as well as receive differing impressions of its coherence and logic. As a result of this analysis, the *Bhagavad Gita* will be shown to advance the narrative paradigm in that it provides a prime example of a *multivalent narrative* from the eastern world. This extension of narrative theory will demonstrate how possibility and novelty can be generated within the Fisher's explication of the narrative paradigm, which has been criticized as too conservative and as disallowing new value adoption.

Context

The *Bhagavad Gita* is a didactic dialogue inserted approximately in the middle of an immensely long Indian epic entitled the *Mahabharata*. This work is eight times larger than the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* combined (Minor, 1982), focusing largely on the epic power struggle between two factions of a warring family, the Kurus and the Pandavas. Klostermaier (1998) indicates that this lengthy epic was supposedly composed by the mystic poet, Vyasa (who also arranged the *Vedas*). While the actual existence of this person is in doubt, many scholars find it

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reasonable to assume that this epic was compiled and "edited" by one or a few individuals (Katz, 1990). Large portions of the text, however, have been added since its ancient beginnings (Minor, 1982).

The *Bhagavad Gita*, an important portion of the *Mahabharata*, begins as a martial narrative about a localized war and quickly transforms into a dialogue transcending any particular context of human existence (Neufeld, 1986). Deutsch (1968) and Zimmer (1989) argue that this is a significant piece of Hindu philosophical work because it synthetically combines many previous themes into its narrative. Some of these include the illusory nature of the phenomenal world, the self, and issues of dharma (duty) that are prevalent in Hinduism (Cross, 1994; Smith, 1986). While extending the speculative ideas from the *Upanishads*, the *Bhagavad Gita* does not emphasize personal salvation through thought alone; instead, issues of duty, metaphysics, and ethics are all intertwined around personal action and intention (De Bary, 1958a).

The artifact itself is relatively short, compared to the immense bulk of its parent text, the *Mahabharata*. Typical translation length is approximately 110 pages, a sizable text but not overwhelming in regard to audience fatigue. The text is composed of short verses, arranged into eighteen chapters. Most of the dialogue in the work is between Arjuna and Krishna. The English translation of this Sanskrit work to be used is the acclaimed version by Eliot Deutsch (1968). Textual references made to this translation shall be cited by chapter number and verse number (i.e., 9:23). With the contextualization of the artifact complete, this inquiry now turns to an explication of the critical method of narrative pioneered by Fisher (1987), augmented here with details from the east.

Narrative Theory, West and East

Western Views

The field of communication in western scholarship has used the narrative paradigm as a lens from which to look at communication. Much of this research is based upon the work of Fisher, who postulated that narration was a fundamental part of human life. While space limitations prevent a full exposition of this paradigm and its subsequent research program, some major tenets of it shall be discussed as they will be challenged by the concept of *multivalent narratives* that this study advances. Fisher (1987) summarizes his narrative paradigm by drawing attention to its fundamental presuppositions:

> (1) Humans are essentially storytellers. (2) The paradigmatic mode of human decision making and communication is "good reasons," which vary in form among situations, genres, and media of communication. (3) The production and practice of good reasons are ruled by matters of history, biography, culture, and character. . . . (4) Rationality is determined by the nature of persons as narrative beings. (p. 64)

Thus, narration is fundamentally linked to the ontology and practices of human society. Fisher continues by explicating "narrative beings":

> [they are identified by] their inherent awareness of *narrative probability*, what constitutes a coherent story, and their constant habit of testing *narrative fidelity*, whether or not the stories they experience ring true with the stories they know to be true in their lives. (p. 64)

It is in on this foundation that Fisher (1987) develops his theory of narrative in all of its mature aspects. He describes the elements of narrative, probability and fidelity, and the various ways a critic can assess these qualities. Additionally, he provides narrative criticisms of public/political rhetoric, literary works, and philosophical discourses as exemplifying the analysis that the narrative paradigm can spawn. While forms of discourse may differ, Fisher (1987) argues, "*behind* any structure that is given to human communication, the perceptual framework of narration will always be constraining and projecting meaning" (p. 193). Similar to Ricoeur (1984), Fisher points out, "ideas and feelings will always be sensed *in* and *through* time" (p. 193).

Considering how audiences actually determine what is a warrant for action, Fisher (1987) develops a "logic of good reasons" which assesses those reasons upon which decisions could be made. He argues that audiences judge reasons as "good" when

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> They are perceived as (1) true to and consistent with what we think we know and what we value, (2) appropriate to whatever decision is pending, (3) promising in effects for ourselves and others, and (4) consistent with what we believe is an ideal basis for conduct. (p. 194)

While this theory is admittedly a philosophical description concerning human communication practices and formal tendencies, it does have application to criticism. Fisher (1987) indicates, "the logic I have outlined and critically applied in interpreting and assessing political, aesthetic, and philosophical discourse is, I believe, a universal logic" (p. 194). While his early work was not a complete manual on rhetorical application of this paradigm, Fisher (1989) argues, "it is true, however, that the narrative paradigm concerns the interpretation and assessment of rhetorical messages and I believe it can serve the rhetorical critic" (p. 56). Thus, the field took this cue and began to enthusiastically apply this theory to instances of human communication.

In doing so, scholars followed Fisher's (1987) and Foss's (1996) lead and turned attention to the use of characterization, events, actions, and settings in an attempt to reconstruct the narrative that audiences are open to experiencing. This paper shall examine the major dialogic events within the *Bhagavad Gita* in order to ground an analysis of narrative probability and fidelity in relation to this work, and to set the stage for the introduction of *multivalence* into narrative theory. Before this analysis can proceed, some observations on Indian rhetoric are in order to establish some general features of narrative in that culture.

Eastern Views

Babbili (1997) discusses the nature of post-colonial ethics discourse in India, including the importance of narrative and the *Bhagavad Gita*. He details that much of Hindu social thought stems from the *Gita* and the narrative structure it exemplifies. Truth, in Hindu religious discourse, often takes the non-discursive form of narrative and story. These narratives of ancient India, such as the *Mahabharata*, affected Greek and Roman thought, but remained peculiar to India.

Extending on this treatment of Indian narrative was Matilal (1992), who indicates that Indian epics often deal with "moral dilemmas," situations where two opposing moral obligations seem to be correct. These epics are the preferred method of moral discourse indigenous to India. Instead of discursive monographs on morals, narrative often fills this socializing and exploratory function. Matilal argues that often the narrative elements cannot be separated from didactic elements in these stories; the story and the dilemmas posed to the characters are the moral instruction. This is very evident in the case of the *Mahabharata* and the *Bhagavad Gita* within it.

The *Mahabharata* is filled with moral dilemmas and issues, one of which is the conversation recounted in the *Bhagavad Gita*. It is in this narrative form that traditional Indian thinkers express and discuss moral philosophy. Matilal (1992) indicates

> Morality was never discussed as such [according to modern "analytic" tradition] in these [traditional] texts. On the other hand, the tradition was very self-conscious about moral values, moral conflicts and dilemmas, as well as about the difficulties of what we call practical reason or practical wisdom. This consciousness found its expression in the epic stories and narrative literature that can, therefore, be used for any illuminating discussion of moral philosophy in India. (p. 5)

Narrative and didactic elements are wedded at the heart of the *Mahabharata*; this lends context and form to the narrative of the *Bhagavad Gita*. Matilal (1992) replies to critics supporting a rigid narrative (form)/didactic (content) dichotomy:

> Indologists have often distinguished between the narrative material and the didactic material in the epic. The implicit idea was that the didactic material was added to the narrative material and sometimes the narrative material was added to the didactic, so that modern scholarship could separate one from the other. This seems to me a very artificial distinction as far as the text of the *Mahabharata* is concerned. The so-called narrative and didactic material are found inextricably fused together in the text, such that they cannot be often differentiated. Sometimes the narrative itself imparts the moral lesson

> without any deliberate efforts on the part of the narrator. In other words, the medium itself is the message here. (p. 5)

Thus, the context and form of the *Bhagavad Gita* play an important role in examining its invitations for audience interpretation.

Indian rhetorical tactics have also been explored as keys to understanding this important mystical work. Deutsch (1968), in critical essays accompanying his translation of the *Bhagavad Gita*, argues that Krishna uses a "'progressive teaching' function" in convincing Arjuna to fight this costly battle (p. 160). Thus, by focusing solely on the "contradictions" that are noticeable in this text,

> one simply misses or is insensitive to one of the standard techniques of teaching employed throughout the Indian philosophical-religious tradition. It is the technique, used at the beginning stages of the student's spiritual development, which seeks to bring about a desired spiritual end through means which we might judge as being not altogether "morally" appropriate to, or consistent with, that end (e.g., the use of intellectual "dishonesty"). In Indian philosophy the end does justify the means—*provided that the end is spiritual enlightenment*. (p. 21)

Philosophical commentators must remain sensitive to the hermeneutic goals and import of this text; this "progressive" teaching technique leads one to higher and higher levels of spiritual realization. Deutsch (1968) indicates that this technique "is founded, psychologically, on the belief that at any given time one is capable of grasping and assimilating only those ideas or arguments that are commensurate with one's achieved level of understanding" (p. 21). What will become apparent, however, is the fact that these contradictions and progressive levels within the text occupy a crucial role in empowering audience reconstruction of narrative meaning.

Narrative Events in the *Bhagavad Gita*

This dialogue has relatively few "physical" events that are described. Instead, argumentative or dialogic events form the substance of the narrative. These events revolve around the exigence created by Arjuna's refusal to fight. Initially, Arjuna tells Krishna, "I see evil portents, O Keshava (Krishna), and I foresee no good in slaying my own kinsmen in the fight" (1:31). Arjuna continues to indicate that wealth and riches are not worth gaining if one must commit atrocious sins against one's family and friends to achieve this end; he summarizes this sin by stating, "In the ruin of the family, its immemorial laws perish; and when the laws perish, the whole family is overcome by lawlessness" (1:40). This state of affairs dooms both the living and the deceased members of the family because "this confusion brings the family itself to hell and those who have destroyed it; for their ancestors fall, deprived of their offerings of rice and water" (1:42). Thus, Arjuna refuses to fight this important battle.

Krishna responds to Arjuna's ruminations with a rather resounding rhetorical retort. This event unfolds with Krishna addressing Arjuna, "It [this despair] is unbecoming of an *aryan*, it does not lead to heaven, it is disgraceful, O Arjuna" (2:2). This attitude of Arjuna's is labeled as "impotent" by Krishna, who argues, "it is not proper of thee. Abandon this petty weakness of heart and arise, O oppressor of the foe" (2:3). Thus, Krishna utilizes appeals to *pathos* to force Arjuna to reconsider his original defiance of violence in this situation.

Arjuna answers this rhetorical event with further complaints about the impending war between the Kurus and the Pandavas. He exclaims, "It would be better (to live) in this world by begging than to slay these noble teachers [Drona and Bhishma]. For by slaying these teachers who desire wealth, I would enjoy only blood-smeared delights" (2:5). Arjuna still rebels at the thought of fighting his own family and friends, but yearns for instruction and advice from Krishna on this topic. He admits, "My being is afflicted with the defect of pity; my mind is confused about my dharma. I ask Thee: tell me decisively which is better. I am Thy pupil; teach me, who seeks refuge in Thee" (2:7). At this point, however, Arjuna claims, "I do not see what can drive away this sorrow which parches my senses" (2:8).

Krishna accepts the invitation to instructional discourse and advises Arjuna as to the nature of this war and its victims. Initially, Krishna tells Arjuna, "Thou grievest for those thou

shouldst not grieve for . . . Wise men do not mourn for the dead or for the living" (2:11). The warriors that Arjuna may slay in this war effort will not die; Krishna informs Arjuna of the importance of reincarnation in life, stating,

> Never was there a time when I did not exist, nor thou, nor these rulers of men; nor will there be a time hereafter when we shall all cease to be. As the soul in this body passes through childhood, youth and old age, so (after departure from this body) it passes on to another body. The sage is not bewildered by this. (2:12-13)

The immortality and transient nature of the individual souls involved in this battle should assuage Arjuna's worries concerning his impending violent action. The worlds portrayed by one's senses "are impermanent" (2:14); the only certainty is "that by which all this is pervaded" (2:17). This non-embodied soul (Self) is truly indestructible; thus, Krishna urges Arjuna to slay his enemies because

> He who thinks this (soul) is a slayer, and he who thinks that this (soul) is slain; both of them are ignorant. This (soul) neither slays or is slain. It is never born, nor does it die, nor having once been, will it again cease to be. It is unborn, eternal and everlasting. This primeval one is not slain when the body is slain. (2:19-21)

The true souls of the brave family members involved in this confrontation cannot really be slain by Arjuna; therefore, he is urged toward the conclusion that fighting is an honorable option.

Krishna anticipates Arjuna's disbelief in this immortality and transmigration of the soul. He preemptively argues, "Even if thou thinkest that it is constantly born and constantly dies, even then, O mighty-armed (Arjuna), thou shouldst not grieve. For death is certain for one that has been born, and birth is certain for one that has died. Therefore for what is avoidable, thou shouldst not grieve" (2:26-27). Thus, if Arjuna does not agree that the soul in these opposing warriors cannot be slain, he is urged to consider that these warriors will eventually die according to the mandates of nature. Krishna concludes this line of argument, stating, "The soul in the body of everyone, O Bharata (Arjuna), is eternal and indestructible" (2:30).

Krishna also uses an appeal to Arjuna's sense of duty. He states, "Further, having regard for thine own dharma, thou shouldst not tremble. There exists no greater good for a Kshatriya than a battle required by duty" (2:31). This battle is a fortunate occurrence for Arjuna, "opening the door to heaven" (2:32). Krishna threatens Arjuna by indicating "But if thou wilt not wage this righteous battle, then having thrown away thy duty and glory, thou wilt incur sin" (2:33). The appeal to *pathos* is readily evident here, as Krishna impacts this sin by pointing out, "men will forever speak of thy dishonor, and for one who has been honored, dishonor is worse than death" (2:34). Thus, Arjuna is implored to fight, for not fighting will result in a violation of duty and accompanying dishonor. Krishna argues that fighting the battle will yield results, regardless of victory or defeat; he indicates "If thou art slain, thou wilt obtain heaven, or if thou conquer, thou wilt enjoy the earth. Therefore arise, O son of Kunti, resolved to fight" (2:37).

Many of the previous argumentative events involve elements of the "*sankhya*" (2:39) system; Krishna now turns toward giving Arjuna the "wisdom of the yoga" (2:39). He points out, "The Vedas deal with the activity of the three *gunas*; but be thou, O Arjuna, free from the three *gunas* and from the pairs of opposites. Be thou constantly fixed in *sattva*: not caring for the possession of property, be self-possessed" (2:45). Nature is determined by the *gunas* (the qualities of the material world that determine action), so Arjuna must find refuge and freedom within his self. Krishna admonishes Arjuna, telling him that "In action only thou hast thou a right and never in its fruits. Let not thy motive be the fruits of action; nor let thy attachment be to inaction" (2:47). Thus, Arjuna is impelled to consider participating in this war from the "higher" stance of performing his duty, a view that transcends and conflicts with earlier, more simple concerns regarding the "fruit" or consequences of the battle. Arjuna responds to this escalation of the argumentative events by questioning, "If it be thought by Thee, O Janardana (Krishna), that (the path of) knowledge is superior to (the path of) action, then why dost Thou urge me, O Keshava (Krishna), in this terrible deed" (3:1)? Arjuna wants a decisive answer as to whether pure contemplation or action is the path to follow in regard to his current dilemma.

Krishna responds, "No one can remain, even for a moment, without performing some action. Everyone is made to act helplessly by the *gunas* born of *prakriti*" (3:5). The emphasized portion of action must be the action itself and its relation to dharma; Krishna points out that "always perform the work that has to be done without attachment, for man attains the Supreme by performing work without attachment . . . thou shouldst perform action also with regard for the maintenance of the world" (3:19-20). Not only does one's dharma uphold the order of the world, but it sets precedents for others; he indicates, "Whatsoever the best man does, other men do too. Whatever standard he sets, that the world follows" (3:21). Krishna argues that Arjuna must uphold his dharma as a warrior, and fight, for "Better one's own dharma, though imperfect, than another's well performed. Better death in (the fulfillment of) one's own law, for another's law is dangerous" (3:35).

Krishna also responds to Arjuna's concerns about his autonomous choice to slay the opposing warriors. After frightening Arjuna with a divine vision of his true "form," Krishna remarks, "Time am I, the world destroyer, matured, come forth to subdue the worlds here. Even without thee, all the warriors in the opposing armies shall cease to be. Therefore, stand up and win fame. Conquering thy enemies, enjoy a prosperous kingdom. By Me they have already been slain. Be thou the mere instrument" (11:32-33). Arjuna is urged to fight since Krishna will consume all of these mortals regardless of Arjuna's personal decision. In fact, Krishna indicates that Arjuna is determined to fight; he states, "If, centered in egoism, thou thinkest 'I will not fight,' vain is this thy resolution; *prakriti* will compel thee" (18:59). Thus, the very forces underlying matter and nature (*prakriti*) shall force Arjuna to participate in this war. Arjuna finally accepts the teachings of Krishna *in toto*, stating, "My delusion is destroyed and I have gained memory (understanding) through Thy grace, O Acyuta! I stand firm with my doubts dispelled; I shall act by Thy word" (18:73). Thus, Arjuna resolves to take part in the battle, attempting to maintain a non-attached attitude while upholding his duty to fight.

Issues of Narrative Probability and Fidelity

Given this analysis of many of the important dialogic events within this narrative, an evaluation of the *Bhagavad Gita* in regard to *narrative probability* and *fidelity* can be undertaken. Fisher (1987) argues that "human communication is tested against the principles of probability (coherence) and fidelity (truthfulness and reliability)" by the audience in any given situation" (p. 47). In terms of probability, the issue is "whether a story 'hangs together,'. . . [this] is assessed in three ways: by its [a story's] *argumentative* or *structural coherence*; by its *material coherence*, that is, by comparing and contrasting stories told in other discourses; and by *characterological coherence*" (Fisher, 1987, p. 47).

While modern audience reaction to the *Bhagavad Gita* will vary based upon their historic situation, some general remarks can be made about the *narrative probability* of this work. It will be noticed, however, that no clear interpretation emerges from this text; this aspect of the *Bhagavad Gita* will be explored in the following section. Audiences will potentially see contradictions in the arguments proposed by Krishna. For example, Krishna appeals to Arjuna's sense of honor (as an individual warrior); latter, he indicates that this same empirical self should not be considered in doing one's duty.

Additionally, Krishna's messages of Arjuna's duty to fight in this war and the duty for universal love (as proposed by Fisher) can be reconciled by charitable audience reconstructions. Perhaps the value of the empirical self is so minute (i.e., Krishna's comments on how these warriors are already slain) that duties of justice and love are triumphant (i.e., the war is just and a warrior's dharma is to fight for the just). In regard to the character of Arjuna, audience acceptance of his moral "flexibility" might be increased due to the "slow" rate of change he undergoes in the narrative. At the beginning of the text, he is adamantly opposed to the war he initially wanted to wage. Krishna slowly (in narrative time—over the course of the entire work) convinces him to fight, but Arjuna's ultimate agreement with this position does not come until Krishna lets Arjuna *experience* what he has been describing—the site of Krishna as the Self incarnate. Thus, at the end of the *Bhagavad Gita*, Arjuna's return to his original position could be

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described as "well earned" as opposed to "fickle" due to this life-altering experience (a "religious experience").

Fisher (1987) regards *narrative fidelity* as whether a story provides warrants, or reasons, for adopting and/or acting upon the values embedded within the narrative. These "good" reasons can be analyzed (and are implicitly analyzed by audiences) through the following questions:

1. What are the implicit and explicit values embedded in the message?
2. Are the values appropriate to the nature of the decision that the message bears upon? [Are any values] omitted, distorted, and misrepresented?
3. What would be the effects of adhering to the values—for one's concept of oneself, for one's behavior, for one's relationships with others and society, and to the process of rhetorical transaction?
4. Are the values confirmed or validated in one's personal experience, in the lives or statements of others whom one admires and respects, and in a conception of the best audience that one can conceive?
5. Are the values that the message offers those that, in the estimation of the critic, constitute the ideal basis for human conduct? (p. 109)

These issues and questions serve as the narrative focus for evaluating the fidelity of a particular message or story.

In regard to the fidelity of the *Bhagavad Gita*, several comments can be made. Initially, one must identify the values in this story. Krishna's message seems to point to the values of selfless action in doing one's dharma and in transcending the empirical self/ego. In doing this, selfishness and material desires are minimized, as evidenced by Krishna's saying, "Act selflessly, without any thought of personal profit" (3:9). Potential trouble could arise in the audience reconciliation and reconstruction of the messages to value duty and the knowledge of one's self in all things. While Krishna provides the analysis that this empirical world is determined by *prakriti* (spiritless matter) in 3:34, the audience could still perceive that duty could not compel one to take other humans' lives. As with probability, audience reconstruction of these values and the hierarchy they occupy is crucial; audiences who perceive the war as just and inevitable will very easily accept Krishna's advice to Arjuna to follow the law of dharma. However, audiences that see the war as being a major infraction of one's love for other beings will inevitably oppose Krishna's pragmatic counsel pushing for Arjuna to make war.

Some audience perceptions of fidelity could be hampered by the deterministic nature of the world portrayed in this work. It seems that although Arjuna has a choice to transcend the empirical self, the other "flat" characters are all determined to fight. Arjuna states to Krishna,

> And these sons of Dhritarastra, all of them, together with the hosts of kings, Bhishma, Drona, and also Karna, together with our chief warriors; Are rushing into Thy mouths, dreadful with terrible tusks. Some are seen with pulverized heads, stuck between Thy teeth. (11:26-27)

Even the metaphors that Arjuna uses to illustrate his vision are extremely deterministic; "As the many water currents of rivers race headlong to the ocean, so these heroes of the world of men enter into Thy flaming mouths" (11:28) and "As moths swiftly enter a blazing fire and perish there, so these creatures swiftly enter Thy mouths and perish" (11:29). While this could result in audience sympathy with the "real" and "freely" deliberative character of Arjuna, it could also invite audience concern about duties toward preserving life. Arjuna (in Chapter 1) was quite concerned about the worthiness of his opponents and the value of their lives—perhaps this will be enough of a concern for human life that audiences will accept the invitation to duty at the cost of pleasant circumstances, either for themselves or others.

As critical participants, the audience must be concerned about the consequences of accepting the values enshrined in this narrative. Some comments can be made about the potential ethical "neutrality" of this work. Assuming audiences follow Fisher's (1987) universal value of love in their discourse and action, one could find a monistic message toward selfless action in support of community and the well being of others. If the Self is in all, then the traditional strain

of Indian ethics could emerge in the audience's adopted maxims—one should treat others as extensions of *your* self. Indeed, Krishna supports this ethic at a higher metaphysical level in such statements as "The seers whose sins are destroyed, whose dualities (doubts) are dispelled, whose selves are disciplined and who rejoice in the welfare of all beings, attain the bliss of Brahman" (5:25). Knowledge of the ultimate Self seems to incline one toward love of others as part of the same non-individuated whole.

Potential problems arise, however, when this doctrine begins to subsume the ethical guidelines concerning actions such as war. Krishna wishes for Arjuna to uphold his duty without attachment to the fruits of the action; in the narrative context of the *Bhagavad Gita*, this equates to war against Arjuna's family and friends. Thus, the love for others is tempered with sustained duties that may not immediately appear to instantiate a love for others. If audiences are situated in a historic situation with socialized concepts of duty that do not follow the ideals of love and justice, violent action could be justified. One must remember that Arjuna is implored to uphold his dharma without selfish attachments to the consequences, even if they are beneficial for him or physically harmful to others. Thus, consequences to audience adoption of the message within this work could be quite positive given just concepts of dharma; however, "unreflective" duty in Nazi Germany could provide impetus to action that appears in accord with this narrative. This can be avoided if the audience realizes that issues of duty are not static and do involve intentions of justice and caring for others—thus, Krishna's ultimate focus on transcending the empirical world and concerns thereof, such as power, wealth, etc.

Assuming a well-intentioned and socialized audience, the *Bhagavad Gita* will be very likely to correlate to their experiences in a positive fashion. While the duty in this story is to wage a bloody war, the audience may perceive that it is a just war and that Arjuna is not a "cold-blooded" killer. Perceptions of virtuous behavior often include the upholding of one's duty without selfish reasons for doing so. Audiences are invited to accept and harmonize with the message of doing one's duty out of the motivation to do one's duty, not for money, person gain, etc. It is reasonable to speculate that a majority of the audiences receptive to this work would not look favorably on doing "charity work" for monetary gain—this same idea of selfless action is upheld in the *Bhagavad Gita*. These values do appear to be ideal, in so far as Arjuna is forced to uphold his duty to do the just and to transcend selfish reasons for action. Instead of advising Arjuna to ultimately act on the basis of emotional and prudential concerns (as Krishna began his persuasive discourse with), he offers the ground of all action in the knowledge of the illusory nature of the empirical self and the consequent dissipation of selfish motivation for action. Inaction and an absorption within the matters of the empirical world are both shunned in this text; instead, a "middle way" is offered to the audience, in which actions are done with the perfected state of mind in an imperfect (unjust) world. The format of this narrative, however, allows for audiences to reconstruct the "theme" of this work in multiple ways; it is this quality that this study label's *multivalence* and that is explored in the following section.

Implications for Multivalent Narratives

While the values of modern societies, especially America, may differ from the society for which the *Bhagavad Gita* was originally composed, the text itself still possesses the original unchanging values within its narrative. These values, however, are often in conflict within the text with other values, some of which may be more familiar to the western audience. These foreign value structures within the text, due to contradiction and undeveloped assertions, force the reader to reconstruct the intent and meaning of this narrative in light of the conflicting values. Thus, new values and permutations of previously accepted values may become available to western audiences. How the text exudes this "rhetoric of possibility" will now be examined in greater detail.

One could argue that issues of supposed contradiction and "non-logical" factors within this example of eastern narrative could provide interesting extensions to Fisher's theory of narrative and its relationship to audience value adoption. Perhaps structural and argumentative dissonance can impel an audience toward constructing a consistent message out of the text. This

point is hinted at by Kashap (1992), who argues that the author(s) of the *Bhagavad Gita* purposely left the message ambiguous to instigate free thinking and message construction by the audience—little was to be taken literally in this work. For instance, the audience could concede some elements (if not all) of the determined world (due to the *gunas*), and still believe that Arjuna, like the audience, has the freedom at least to choose to become enlightened (through emphasizing one *guna* in particular). Individual efficacy and physical determinism can potentially be reconciled with charitable audience reconstruction. In general, the metaphors and description of ultimate reality taking the form of Krishna could be adaptable to audience expectations; one could mold this to a variety of religious bents ranging from mystic theism to atomic pluralism.

However, a homogenously valued reconstruction of the text is not ultimately possible to the cognitively advanced audience; too many of Krishna's phrases and assertions come into conflict and some blatantly contradict at the level of value. Instead, this text could open the audience to new values and perspectives that they have not been exposed to before. Before this idea is expanded upon, it is essential that the conflict between the narrative paradigm and the introduction of novelty through narratives be explored.

Kirkwood (1992) points out that Fisher's (1987) theory of narrative precludes communicating new values and views to an audience, since fidelity is measured by coherence with previous audience views and experiences. Kirkwood argues "it is also troubling, for it [Fisher's theory] implies that 'good stories' cannot and perhaps should not exceed people's values and beliefs, whether or not these are admirable or accurate" (p. 30). This problem is evident in the *Bhagavad Gita*; its emphasis on the ultimate unity of all souls, the illusory nature of the empirical world, and its strict adherence to caste-based duty might estrange many members of a western audience.

Indeed, narrative can utilize contradiction and conflict to open up rhetorical possibilities within the audience. Bennett and Edelman (1985) indicate,

> If stories can be constructed to wall off the senses to the dilemmas and contradictions of social life, perhaps they also can be presented in ways that open up the mind to creative possibilities developed in ways that provoke intellectual struggle, the resolution of contradiction, and the creation of a more workable human order. (pp. 161-162)

The *Bhagavad Gita* can begin to show how eastern texts, often perceived as contradictory and "circular" by western audiences, might utilize contradiction and multiple values to stimulate novel lines of audience thought and valuation.

Kirkwood (1992) proposes an explanation of how narratives can expand the possibilities open to audience reaction and action; he begins with the assumption that states of mind can influence and define morally virtuous actions (and the perceptions thereof). He indicates, "exercising certain states of mind not only enables virtue; it helps define it" (p. 53). Narratives that reveal the state of mind of characters transcending the "possible world" are said to be more effective at stimulating new lines of audience thought. Kirkwood explicates this conception of the "nonrevealing" account;

> Because nonrevealing accounts do not make clear the states of mind which enable performances, audiences necessarily focus on the particulars of these performances, details that depend heavily on what Bruner calls the "possible world" of the story. Such performances exemplify specific possibilities of conduct for auditors only when this world closely resembles the world auditors inhabit. (p. 37)

Thus, if the world of the narrative is removed from the world of the audience and no realistic states of mind are portrayed, the audience will experience difficulty in generalizing the possibility for novel action and valuation to their lives. Kirkwood explains the opposite case, the "revealing" account:

> By comparison, because revealing accounts disclose states of mind that exceed the "possible worlds" in which they are evoked, even plainly invented performances can

> disclose compelling possibilities of awareness. . . . Thus the ability of revealing accounts to disclose possibilities does not hinge on their fidelity. (p. 37)

Kirkwood's ultimate suggestion for revealing possibilities is for "rhetors . . . to make them [narrative actions] revealing by reducing their ambiguity" (p. 40). While the mindset of Arjuna may be explained through some of his statements, a more heuristic explanation must be proposed since this narrative deals mainly with discourse *about* states of mind and action, not discourse demonstrating states of mind that *induce* certain actions and results.

While previous work on polysemious texts has been productive in discussing the familiar meaning that audiences can construct from texts such as television programming (Condit, 1989; Fiske, 1986a; 1986b; 1987; 1991; Jensen, 1991; Rowland & Strain, 1994), an interesting extension to narrative theory can be made in that this narrative uses ambiguity and multiple levels of conflicting meaning to facilitate audience openness and possible acceptance to foreign value structures. A *multivalent narrative* uses contradiction and multiple value structures within the text to allow audience members to "grasp" the familiar portions of the narrative and then slowly acculturate themselves to the non-native portions of the concepts involved through reconstructing what the narrative means in terms of valuation. As recounted previously, Krishna uses a variety of argumentative tactics to convince Arjuna that fighting the war is the noble action to take. He uses appeals to honor, desire for heavenly rewards, familial protection, and personal salvation in convincing Arjuna that he must fight (or to adopt the belief that he should fight). While the textual persuasion is directed at Arjuna, the audience still must contemplate whether the enshrined values and actions within the narrative are acceptable. This allows the dialogic interaction between Arjuna and Krishna to stimulate new thoughts in a western audience, and hence, contributes to a rhetoric of possibility (Poulakos, 1984). The potential for novel views being transmitted to the audience exists because of the differing appeals within the text itself; while they are not absolutely contradictory, these positions cannot be held at the same time as being the motivating reasons for Arjuna to fight. Instead, the audience might be initially drawn to the justification that offers more *fidelity* with their previous experience. After this initial invitation to the text, the audience member will have to reconcile all of these arguments in their own personal reconstruction of the holistic narrative, since most of the contradictions are so embedded in the narrative as to prevent one position from emerging without audience interpretation. For instance, Krishna states, "If thou art slain, thou wilt obtain heaven, or if thou conquer, thou wilt enjoy the earth. Therefore arise, O son of Kunti, resolved to fight" (2:37). Arjuna is offered a justification for fighting based upon actual rewards for *him* if he upholds his duty. However, Krishna soon shifts the justificatory stance to the immortality of the warriors, stating,

> Never was there a time when I did not exist, nor thou, nor these rulers of men; nor will there be a time hereafter when we shall all cease to be. As the soul in this body passes through childhood, youth and old age, so (after departure from this body) it passes on to another body. The sage is not bewildered by this. (2:12-13)

Later, Krishna readjusts his tactics toward Arjuna and emphasizes the inevitability that these individuals will die, indicating,

> Time am I, the world destroyer, matured, come forth to subdue the worlds here. Even without thee, all the warriors arrayed in the opposing armies shall cease to be. . . . By Me they have already been slain. Be thou the mere instrument, O Savyasacin [Arjuna]. (11:32-33)

The audience member is forced to take some stance on these three arguments concerning involvement in war and on personal death; however, not all three can be held to be correct at once (at least not without further systemic justification and explanation). It could be speculated that the audience accepts the invitation to believe the justification that fits the best with their belief system, only at a later point taking measures to reduce the dissonance among all three arguments. It is at this phase that new possibilities can enter into the audience's realm of live possibilities; after further reflection and consideration of the entire text (including hermeneutic activity to see if

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the contradictions are only illusory), the audience member might find that some novel ideas are not only used in explaining these contradictions, but are also worthy of belief. Hence, a multivalent narrative such as the *Bhagavad Gita* offers various lines of argument that audiences may be interested in, resulting in their commitment to reconcile other, more ambiguous and potentially contradictory ideas. It is at this point that possibility can enter in the use of narrative.

The perceived contradictions in the basis of this narrative can be the source of generative values in a non-eastern audience. Berg (1987) notes that the fit between the narrative background of war and actions such as fighting one's family and the emergent themes of non-attached action and duty is less than perfect. Indeed, western audiences may initially be repulsed by the notion that one must uphold their duty as a warrior by killing family members over the rights to land and power. Add to this the previously mentioned reasons about the immortality of the soul, audiences may feel any amount of immorality is allowed by this eastern text. Instead, this lack of immediate fit between the narrative of war and the narrative of metaphysical/ethical knowledge proffered by Krishna allows audiences the invitation to find agreeable elements within the text, followed by attempts to reconcile disparate elements in the narrative and the value scheme inherent within it. This in turn allows the audience to come into contact with values and value schemes they may have ordinarily ignored or rejected (i.e., the western aversion to any form of "pagan" pantheism).

Eastern uses of narrative such as the *Bhagavad Gita* suggest some tentative suggestions on how *multivalent narratives* operate. These narratives use various value structures inherent in the narrative to allow various audience reconstructions; the novel aspect is that foreign value structures can be seen as new possibilities by the audience through this reconstruction. Indicating the general importance of narrative in opening up possibilities to the audience, Kirkwood (1992) argues, "narrative is perhaps the foremost means by which possibilities are disclosed" (p. 32). Based on the preceding analysis, this study finds four general features of such a text that aims for or holds the possibility of exposing audiences to novel possibilities and values. Initially, *these texts must contain differing value structures and hierarchies*. In the *Bhagavad Gita*, various justifications for participation in the war and dejustifications for such violence are voiced at differing points in the dialogic events. For instance, Arjuna provides various arguments against fighting based upon respect of elders and family members and a revulsion of wealth-seeking. Krishna answers this value system with responses assuming an opposite value system; if Arjuna does not fight, he will be looked upon as a coward ("impotent") and as not a true "aryan." Later in the narrative, Krishna offers an alternate schema of justification in his ruminations about salvation through non-attached action upholding one's caste-based duties. The non-attached focus of this action makes this position seemingly incompatible with the previous concerns of impacts upon one's reputation and familial health.

A second facet of multivalent narratives is that *they must not immediately or conclusively resolve the tensions between these value structures*. For instance, Krishna, while ending the dialogue with appeals to Arjuna to fight (hence, upholding his duty) without attachment to the fruits of his action, does not *explicitly* repudiate his former statements concerning the consequentialist reasons for Arjuna to fight. Instead, the audience is left to ponder the place of these earlier reasons in the on-going dialogue between these two characters. Thus, the conclusion of the text holds several surviving value structures that could be adopted or supported by the audience in two ways—either alone or in an audience initiated reconciliation with at least one other system in the text.

The third element of these narratives is the fact that *the value structures implied in the text can admit to differing actions in relation to audience perception*. In the *Bhagavad Gita*, an abstract system of non-attached action is superimposed upon an ancient battlefield with specific characters. The audience might take this value system to condone violence when it fits with one's social-based duty; feelings of guilt induced by the independently "rational" western mind are eased by this seemingly non-attached adherence to duty. Conversely, audiences may come away from this narrative with insight into this new and foreign value structure of the sacred in all

beings, admitting a maxim of personal non-violence. Reconciliation of Arjuna's violent future actions is made with Krishna's comment that the war to be fought is a "just" war against evil forces—the audience, not likely to personally face any just wars, is free to adopt the normative guidelines for valuation and "interpret away" the narrative relationship to violence and war. Narratives, by holding value structures that do not conclusively lead to the actions described in the narrative, can entice the audiences into intellectually partaking in their meaning by not alienating them through depictions of concrete events and actions.

The fourth aspect to multivalent narratives is that *the various value structures within the narrative must not be so determinant that they cannot be reconciled.* If the various value hierarchies are so entrenched and mutually exclusive, then the text becomes so "contradictory" that the audience is less likely to produce and adopt new values from its narrative impetus. Instead, the contradictions may be "resolved" by dogmatically reading one line of reasoning as superior to the others or avoiding affect by the text altogether. Instead, the text must tread a "middle path" as the *Bhagavad Gita* does so eloquently. Its synthesis of previous Hindu thought leaves it open to charges of contradiction from the logically acute western audiences, but it is not so extreme as to prevent audiences from attempting to reconcile and consider how these views fit together. For instance, scholars such as Deutsch (1968), Radhakrishnan (1998), Minor (1986), Easwaren (1985), and countless others have produced reasonable accommodations within the scope of the original text that reconcile the disparate values and arguments within the *Bhagavad Gita.* While not upholding the strict standards of western logic, eastern texts such as the *Bhagavad Gita* use *multivalence* to open the audience to radically new ideas and syntheses of seemingly removed ideas. While these four qualities of multivalent narratives do not exhaust the possible study of this "novel" rhetorical process, it does make some important headway into describing the workings of Indian narrative.

Conclusion

Issues of narrative probability and fidelity have been explored, leading to the conclusion that most audiences will sense a message of love and unity with others in this text. However, the historicity of certain audiences may predispose them to reconstruct the message with too much emphasis on strict duty and not enough attention to issues of non-attachment, hate, desire, etc. For instance, a warrior or leader could avidly engage in a harmful foreign policy, seeing it as their duty while ignoring the *Bhagavad Gita*'s injunction on attachment to empirical fruits, results, and consuming desires such as hatred and ego-driven love. One must enshrine compassion and love for all beings since they are all one in Brahman, but one must not let these desires consume one's life with attachment to the individual ego and the world of the senses. Instead, calmly upholding one's duty without attachment to the illusory world of the senses is the path advised by Krishna.

The narrative paradigm has been expanded by looking at this eastern text in light of its multivalence; the multiple potentially contradictory messages allow for the introduction of novelty and possibility into the audience members' belief systems. Audiences are initially confronted with a narrative where Krishna gives various lines of argument concern morality and action, culminating with the ambiguous value structure of non-attached action in light of caste-based duty. Instead of rejecting this text because it contains foreign ideas and values, the *Bhagavad Gita*'s inclusion of emotional, prudential, and monistic metaphysical lines of justification offer the audience a diverse array of invitations to closer textual intimacy. Some of these invitations and arguments will be more acceptable to western audience members than others. Possibility and foreign ideas can be integrated into the audience member's belief system, however, when the audience member is forced to reconcile the putative dissonance evidenced between the ideas that he or she agrees with and those that he or she finds unappealing. The reconstruction the audience member is compelled to make by this text exposes him or her to novel ideas in a way that is very engaging; these possibilities within the text cannot be dismissed. Instead, they must be fleshed out and systematically explored to see if they agree with the already accepted portions of the text or if they are the precursors to a new belief that should be accepted because of its previously unrecognized appeal.

This study advances an understanding of *multivalent narratives*, such as the *Bhagavad Gita*, that observes four required elements in order for a text to inspire possible value system change and novelty in audience members: these texts must contain differing value structures and hierarchies, they must not immediately or conclusively resolve the tensions between these value structures, the value structures implied in the text can admit to differing actions in relation to audience perception, and the various value structures within the narrative must not be so determinant that they cannot be reconciled. Thus, multivalent narratives can employ these traits to expose audiences to alien value structures that may ordinarily be opposed or rejected if presented in a straightforward argumentative manner.

This use of multivalence calls for a fundamental modification of Fisher's (1987) concepts of *narrative probability* and *fidelity*. Instead of simply judging a narrative based upon its adherence to one's held value structure, this study has highlighted how modern audiences can still gain something from this text even though it is often remote from their life-world of values and beliefs. Thus, novel ideas and values can be broached through the structure of this narrative to audiences in the west; if Fisher was strictly correct, they would overwhelmingly reject this text based upon the foreign nature of many of its values. Indeed, the *Bhagavad Gita* walks the fine line of a multivalent narrative between being too familiar (hence, lacking novelty) and being too foreign (thus resulting in audience rejection). The narrative paradigm, through consideration of how contradiction and multiple value structures function within eastern narratives, can get a better theoretical grasp on how multivalent narratives involve the audience in novel realms of value.

In all, this text is very deserving of study and this inquiry has been a step toward constructing some theoretical insights into the practice of Indian rhetoric and narrative practice. For too long, western scholars have either ignored the practice of eastern rhetoric or shunned specific traditions, such as that of the Indian subcontinent. This study hopes to break through the barriers preventing the light of inquiry from illuminating ancient and powerful narratives such as the *Bhagavad Gita*. In doing so, our understanding of these cultures shall be enriched, as well as the scope and explanatory power our theories of narrative possess.

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